EVALUATION OF DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR ENDEMIC NEPHROPATHY

Živka Dika¹, Marie-Hélène Antoine², Cécile Husson², Eric G. De Prez², Jelena Kos¹, Maja Mišić³, Mirjana Fuček⁴, Dubravka Čvorišćec⁴, Marie-Françoise Bourgeade⁵, Joëlle L. Nortier²,6, Bojan Jelaković¹

¹ School of Medicine University of Zagreb, UHC Zagreb, Dept. of Nephrology, Hypertension and Dialysis, Zagreb, Croatia
² Experimental Nephrology Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
³ Dr. Josip Benčević, General Hospital, Slavonski Brod, Croatia
⁴ School of Medicine, University of Zagreb, UHC Zagreb, Laboratory for Clinical Diagnosis, Zagreb, Croatia
⁵ INSERM U785, Centre hépato-biliaire, Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France
⁶ Department of Nephrology, Dialysis and Renal Transplantation, Erasme Hospital, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Corresponding Author: Živka Dika, School of Medicine University of Zagreb, UHC Zagreb, Dept. of Nephrology, Hypertension and Dialysis, Zagreb, Croatia; Mob. phone: + 385 12 38 82 71, Fax: 385 12 38 82 71;
E-mail: zivkadika@gmail.com

Abstract
Diagnosis of endemic nephropathy (EN) is based on the combination of several clinical and laboratory criteria. Despite extensive research no specific diagnostic biomarker for EN has yet been identified. The aim of the study was to evaluate the diagnostic significance of the variables previously proposed as diagnostic criteria, but also new ones. After an extended questionnaire, the clinical and laboratory examination population in EN villages was classified according to the modified WHO criteria. The urinary active form of TGF-β was measured with a bioassay using a cell line which expresses luciferase activity. In the study we used ROC analysis to examine the predictive value of the tested variables. In the study there was no difference in haemoglobin level between the study subgroups. Leucine aminopeptidase (LAP) in urine and active urinary TGF-β levels were increased in the EN diseased group when compared to other subgroups, but they did not fulfil the statistical criteria needed for differentiating a diseased form from other study subgroups. Both kidney length and parenchima thickness, alfa1-microglobulinuria, and kidney function assessed by MDRD formula were the variables that differentiated the study subgroups well. Based on our results the cut-off value of alfa1-microglobulin for screening should be 23.5 mg/g creatinine instead of 15 mg/g creatinine in the present criteria, and for making a diagnosis of EN 31.5 mg/g creatinine. Persons with a positive family history for EN had a 5.8 times greater risk of developing EN when compared to a negative one.

Taken together, the abovementioned variables should be implemented in new uniform diagnostic criteria for EN.

Key words: endemic nephropathy, aristolochic acid nephropathy, diagnostic criteria, TGFbeta, alfa1-microglobulin.

Diagnosis of endemic nephropathy (EN), an environmental form of aristolochic acid nephropathy, is based on the combination of several clinical and laboratory criteria. Despite extensive research no specific diagnostic biomarker for EN has yet been identified. Currently used diagnostic criteria in different EN centres involve different combinations of parameters and various cut-off values and many of them are not in agreement with the proposed international guidelines [1–7].
The aim of the study was to evaluate the diagnostic significance of the variables previously proposed as diagnostic criteria, but also new ones.

**Subjects and Methods**

All inhabitants older than 18 years of age in both EN and control villages were invited to participate and were examined on a door-to-door basis. After an epidemiological questionnaire, medical history taking, and clinical and laboratory examinations, the EN population was classified according to the modified WHO criteria as "diseased", "suspected of having EN", "at risk for EN", and "others", who did not fulfill the criteria and were unrelated to EN [8].

Laboratory analyses involved determination of haemoglobin, serum creatinine, urinary α1-microglobulin, creatinine, active TGF-β and leucine aminopeptidase (LAP) from untimed spot urine sample. Haemoglobin was determined using optical fluid cytometry with the electronic counter, serum creatinine using the continuous photometric method with alkaline Picrat, and urinary α1-microglobulin by an immunonephelometric assay. The urinary active form of TGF-beta was measured with a bioassay using a cell line which expresses luciferase activity in response to active TGF-beta in a dose-dependent manner. Values were expressed as medians and 25th–75th percentiles in mg/g creatinine. Urinary LAP enzymatic activity was measured with a spectrofluorometric assay after dilution of the samples with the buffer. Results were expressed as micromoles of 7-amido-4-methyl-coumarin produced per millimole of urinary creatinine. Kidney function was assessed by estimation of the glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) using the abbreviated MDRD formula.

Kidney ultrasound was performed using an LG ultrasound machine with a sector probe of 3.5 MHz. Both kidney length and parenchima thickness were measured in sections visually estimated to represent the largest diameter.

In the study ROC analysis was used to examine the predictive value of the tested variables.

**Results**

In the present cross-sectional study 1140 adult persons were enrolled, 764 from EN and 376 from control villages. After an extended questionnaire and clinical and laboratory examinations, the population in EN villages was classified according to the modified WHO criteria as "diseased" (N = 35), "suspected of having EN" (N = 70), those "at risk for EN" (N = 212) and "others" (N = 447).

In the study, there was no difference in haemoglobin level between the study subgroups (P = 0.449). Even though leucine aminopeptidase (LAP) in urine was significantly higher in "diseased" when compared to other study subgroups (all P < 0.05), it did not fulfill the statistical criteria needed for differentiating diseased form other study subgroups. Moreover, active urinary TGF-beta levels were increased in the EN diseased group when compared to other subgroups. However, this increase did not meet the criteria of statistical significance when the different groups were compared. In the present study the assessment of kidney function by MDRD formula as well as both kidney length and parenchima thickness were the parameters that showed statistical significance in differentiating the study subgroups (all P < 0.05). In the present study α1microglobulin in urine was the best biomarker in screening and diagnosing EN. Based on our results the cut-off value of α1microglobulin for screening should be 23.5 mg/g creatinine instead of the 15 mg/g creatinine in the present criteria, and for making a diagnosis of EN 31.5 mg/g creatinine.

In the study persons with a positive family history for EN had a 5.8 times greater risk of developing EN when compared to a negative one.

**Discussion**

Diagnostic criteria for EN were described more than 50 years ago. Currently used criteria from EN centres involve different combinations of parameters, with various cut-off values and many of them are not in agreement with the proposed international guidelines.

Anaemia, characteristic of a chronic kidney disease, has not shown to be a good marker in differentiating WHO subgroups in the study. Similar results were reported by the Serbian EN centre using another diagnostic criteria for EN [4]. Therefore haemoglobin should not be
used as a diagnostic criterion for EN. Although the early phase of EN is characterized by proximal tubule damage, the proximal tubule enzyme LAP has not shown to be a good marker in differentiating the study subgroups. Again, Djukanovic et al. reported similar results using a different proximal tubule enzyme, urine alkaline phosphatase. The progression of EN, especially in the advanced stage of the disease, is characterized by interstitial renal fibrosis and TGF-β in renal fibrosis plays a central role [9]. Several studies have shown no correlation between urinary TGF-β and histological findings of renal fibrosis [10–11]. In this cohort study, active TGF-beta levels were increased in the EN diseased group when compared to other subgroups. However, this increase did not meet the criteria of statistical significance when the different groups were compared. Further studies are needed in order to determine if combined with other urinary markers (microproteins), this cytokine could be helpful in discriminating patient subpopulations.

Both kidney length and parenchima thickness, α1MICR, and kidney function assessed by MDRD formula were the variables that differentiated the study subgroups well. Moreover, subjects with a positive family history of EN, i.e. the WHO subgroup of those at risk, as well as those with α1mCR greater than 23.5 mg/g creatinine who in our study partly represented persons in the WHO subgroup suspected of having EN, are persons at greater risk of developing EN and therefore should be regularly followed up by their general practitioners and nephrologists. The above-mentioned variables have been implemented in recently published uniform diagnostic criteria for EN [12].

REFERENCES

Резиме

ЕВАЛУАЦИЈА НА ДИЈАГНОСТИЧКИТЕ КРИТЕРИУМИ ЗА ЕНДЕМСКА НЕФРОПАТИЈА

Живка Дика1, Мари-Хелене Антоин2, Сесил Хусон2, Ерик Г. де През3, Јелена Кое1, Маја Мишин3, Мирјана Фучек4, Дубравка Чворишкец4, Мари-Франсоа Бургед5, Жоел Л. Нортен2,6, Бојан Јелаков1

1sehen. Медицински факултет, Универзитет во Загреб, УХЦ Загреб, Оддел за нефрологија, хипертензија и дијализа, Загреб, Р. Хрватска
2 Единица за експериментална нефрологија, Медицински факултет, Универзитет Либре во Брисел, Белгија
3 Општа болница „Д-р Јосип Бенчевиќ“, Славонски Брод, Хрватска
4 Медицински факултет, Универзитет во Загреб, УХЦ Загреб, Лабораторија за клиничка дијагноза, Загреб, Хрватска
5 INSERM U785, Хепато-билијарен центар, Болница Пол Брус, Вилемуф, Франција
6 Оддел за нефрологија, дијализа и ренална трансплантација, Болница Еразмо, Универзитет Либре во Брисел, Белгија

Дијагнозата на ендемска нефродисфункција (ЕН) е заснована на комбинација на неколку клинички и лабораториски критериуми. И покрај опширното истражување, сè уште не е идентификуван специфичен дијагностички биомаркер за ЕН. Целта на студијата беше да се оцени дијагностичкото значење на претходно предложените варијабли како дијагностички критериуми, но, исто така, и на нови. По спроведувањето опширен прашањник, клиничките и лабораториските испитувања на населението во селата со ЕН беа класифицирани според модификациите критериуми на СЗО. Унтарната активна форма на TGF-β се мереше со биоасе, со кои изразува активност на луциферазата. Во студијата користевме анализа РОЦ за да се испита предвидувачката вредност на тестираните варијабли. Во студијата немаше разлика во нивоата на хемоглобинот меѓу подгрупите на студијата. Нивото на леуцин аминопептидаза (ЛАП) во уриналата и нивоата на активен уринерен TGF-β беа зголемени во групите на заболнените со ЕН во споредба со другите подгрупи, но тие не ги исполните статистичките критериуми потребни за диференцијација на заболевената форма од други подгрупи на студијата. И должината на бубрешните и дебелината на паренхимот, алофен-1 микроглобулин на ендемска од други подгрупи на студијата. Врз основа на нашите резултати, cut-off вредноста на алофен-1 микроглобулин за скрининг треба да биде 23,5 mg/g креатинин наместо 15 mg/g креатинин по сегашните критериуми, и за дијагностицирање на ЕН 31,5 mg/g креатинин. Лицата со позитивната фамилијарна историја за ЕН имаа 5,8 пати поголем ризик од развој на ЕН во споредба со негативната. Сè заедно, горенаведените варијабли треба да бидат имплементирани во новите униформирани дијагностички критериуми за ЕН.

Ключни зборови: ендемска нефродисфункција, нефродисфункција од аристолохична киселина, дијагностички критериуми, TGF-beta, алофен-1 микроглобулин.